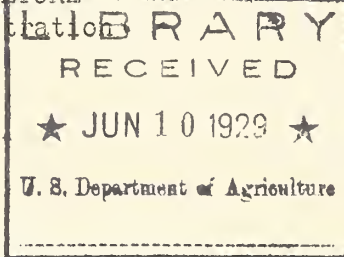


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IS THE FOOD LAW ENFORCED?*

When the Federal food and drugs act, commonly known as the pure food law, was under consideration by Congress some 25 years ago, the press was full of sensational stories of gross adulteration and misbranding of foods. We heard of vinegar containing sulphuric acid, of sugar and flour adulterated with ground white stone, of confectionery colored with poisonous dyes. Some of these stories may have been exaggerated. Many were only too true.

Let me cite an example. The Food, Drug, and Insecticide Administration, which now enforces the pure food law, has in its museum in Washington specimens of what appear to be coffee berries. These objects have the shape, general appearance, and color scheme of coffee, but there their resemblance to coffee ends abruptly. As a matter of fact, they are nothing more nor less than starch, carefully molded in the form of unground coffee beans and so colored as to be practically indistinguishable. This ingenious product was once used to adulterate shipments of coffee beans in the days when the very chicory employed to adulterate coffee was itself adulterated. The food law has long since put frauds like this and the wooden nutmeg into the discard.

Quite naturally the investigation of such flagrant violations offered spectacular copy for the press. As a producer of headlines of remarkable size, I might also mention the dead-horse beef episode. This fit of fancy nature-faking took place in those early days before the commercial automobile became epidemic, when an occasional dead horse lying in the streets excited neither surprise nor consternation. Some misguided genius looked upon these horses as they lay and a great thought was born in his mind. He would haul them over to a New Jersey suburb, work over them a little, and then sell the results of his forethought, technique, and enterprise to the unsuspecting New Yorkers as beef. The clever individual who brought this industry into being

* Talk broadcast by Dr. P. B. Dunbar over WRC, April 26, 1929.

naturally shrank from too much publicity. His purported business was the manufacture of glue and fertilizer, and his so-called beef was distributed in the dark of the moon. Anyone who showed an undue curiosity about the nocturnal activities of the establishment was shooed away in a manner more vigorous than courteous. But one day a typical bum with a week's growth of beard, and a costume of really extraordinary diversity and abbreviation, applied for a job at the plant. He was willing to work for a very small wage, so he was assigned to pilot the dead horse wagon. Later an equally disreputable friend of his applied for and was given a job as his assistant, and thereby the dead-horse beef business sealed its fate, for both bums were federal inspectors. Their activities, and those of their associates, who were disguised as rag-pickers on an adjoining dump, rapidly unearthed evidence about this astounding business which soon put the plant out of action. The guilty parties unfortunately fled the country before they could be apprehended and imprisoned, but it is safe to say that dead-horse beef has been unobtainable on the New York market since that date --- nor has its absence been duly mourned at that.

It isn't hard to understand how such stories kept the public alive to the activities of the food and drug inspection service twenty years ago. But it is also obvious that such flagrant violations could not continue once the law got into efficient operation. It is no longer necessary for inspectors to disguise themselves as hoboes and there has been a dearth of really adventurous cases in more recent years. Sensational stories about pure food law activities no longer appear in the daily papers and it is not surprising, therefore, that the question is not infrequently asked, "Is the food law enforced?" The answer is "Yes."

It is a fact that for the last 22 years the food and drug supply of the nation has been protected by a network of inspection stretching from coast to coast. This inspection service, known as the Food, Drug, and Insecticide Administration, has a personnel of some 500, consisting largely of specialists in chemistry, medicine, bacteriology and microscopy, stationed in laboratories scattered throughout the United States. They are continuously engaged in the analysis and study of our food and drug supply. They maintain constant vigilance in preventing and correcting adulteration and misbranding. Since 1907, this organization and its predecessor, the Bureau of Chemistry, have instituted more than 16,000 seizures and prosecutions for violations of the law, and, more important than that perhaps, American manufacturers have been shown in countless constructive ways how to improve the purity of their products, and this has all been done at an annual cost of less than one cent per capita.

The law covers all shipments of foods or drugs, whether for man or for animals, whether imported or domestic, except those that originate and are consumed wholly within the borders of a State. It provides not only that your food shall be wholesome, but it requires that it shall be honestly labeled. It requires that your drugs shall be of the strength and purity their labels indicate and that their labels shall not make unwarranted claims as to curative value. It protects your health and, if you will take the trouble to study the labels intelligently, you can make the law protect your pocketbook, because the labels must be honest. By labels I mean statements appearing upon or within the package. The law does not cover advertising that does not accompany the package. Because of growing experience on the part of food law enforcing officers, because of the cooperative efforts of State and city food and drug officials who have supervision over products which originate and are consumed wholly within their own State, and because of the ever-increasing sense of the ethical on the part of food and drug manufacturers, fostered by 22 years of law enforcement, it is safe to say that the citizens of the United States can enjoy today a purer, safer, and more honestly labeled food and drug supply than ever before in the history of our country.